



# HELM



## Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

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## EXPLORING CAVES BEACH

2024

Before the seaside township of Caves Beach developed, the area was known as “The Plains”, then, “The Plains Beach”, eventually becoming Caves Beach after its famous feature – the ocean sculpted caves at the southern end of the beach, where people came to picnic, surf and swim. The area extended along the eastern coast of the Swansea peninsula to Pinny Beach. Aptly named at the time, The Plains was a place of few trees, mainly patches of coastal heath. This landscape proved to be an ideal setting on a number of occasions in 1840 for the bushranger gang – The Jewboys, made up of escaped convicts led by Edward Davies, as they moved from the Brisbane Waters district to the Upper Hunter Valley. They built shelters from saplings just inside the tree line, affording them with cover, yet at the same time providing good views of any approaching police or other intruders. It is said that some of their “accumulated treasures” were buried in the sand for safe keeping. The general area of the present Caves Beach Shopping Centre was known as “Hams Plains”, the location of the home, “Bellevue”, of William Henry Ham, a worker at the stone quarry. The area was sometimes referred to as “Bellevue Plains”. The area around the site of the primary and high schools was known as “Monkey Town” at one stage. The Amos brothers had won the contract to build the Swansea break wall and provided accommodation, mainly in the form of tents for their workers at the quarry nearby. The workers were known as “powder monkeys” due to scampering over the rock walls to plant explosives. Many said in jest that they resembled a band of monkeys. In the 1880s the next section began at what is now Spoon Rocks Road and passed above the quarry to Pinny Beach. That area was a heath known as “Pincushion Plain” because of the numerous spikey pincushion-like plants, that grew on this windswept slope and were nicknamed pinny plants. The seaside area was a popular picnic destination. At first, the quarry to bridge train which ran down the middle of the park next to the main road was used for these excursions. Later bullock wagon outings became popular.



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For a time in the early 1960s it was named Mawson after the developer, but some residents objected and in 1965, the obvious name of “Caves Beach” was restored; the area having been referred to by the Awabakal people as the beach of caves. By then the Ham family had long moved from the area; only the northern section of the beach – “Hams Beach” retained a reference to their presence. And so the various names by which the area had been known, passed into history.

**Thank you to Pat Conroy and staff, kindly supporting our community; and heritage.**

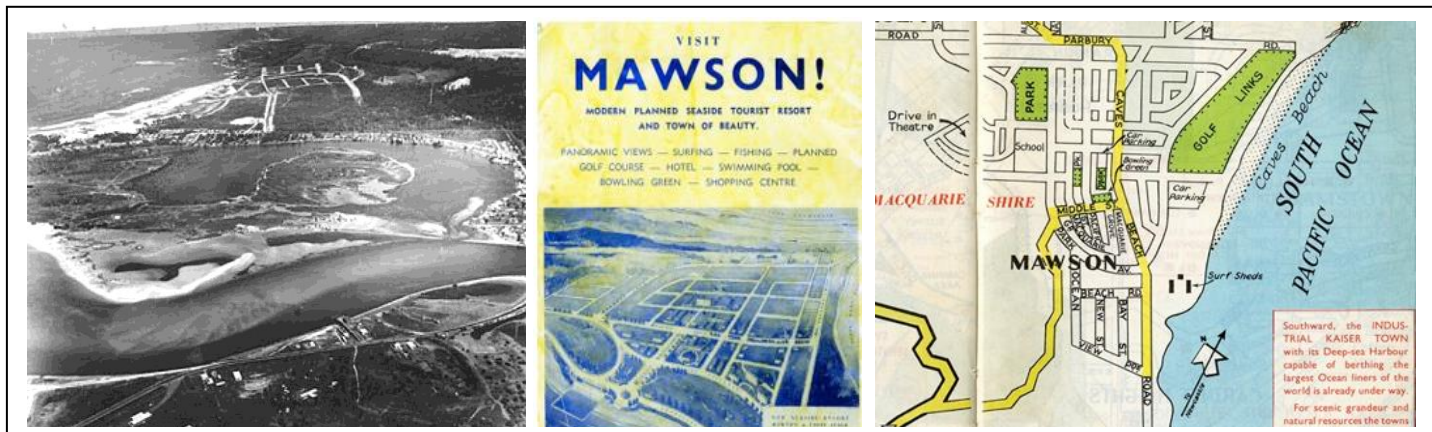
## EARLY DAYS.

In 1972 an archaeological dig was carried out at a Midden discovered at Swansea Heads, led by Dr Dyall from University of Newcastle, providing a glimpse of how the Awabakal people of the area lived nearly 8,000 years ago, according to carbon dating. Along with a variety of shells common to the area, the remains of animals such as wallabies and goannas were identified. Larger fish, mostly bream and mullet, were caught by spearing. The resin from the grass trees of the plain often being used in the making of the spears; and the fine-grained quartzite in the sand for honing their stone implements. Smaller fish were trapped or netted. Trips to nearby Moon Island availed a source of eggs from nesting sea birds, and the capture of seals. Several Aboriginal burial sites were found in the Caves Beach/Swansea area dating back 3,000 years.

Early land grants were to Charles Parbury, Marianne and Frances Bundock in 1867 after being surveyed in 1864. 1881 witnessed Alexander and Robert Amos begin construction of a rail line to carry stone from their quarry situated at The Plains, near where the current Caves Beach schools are located, to build the retaining wall along the northern side of the entrance to Lake Macquarie. A settlement of tents was built to provide accommodation for the workers and their families. In 1883, Thomas Boyd was appointed Senior pilot to guide boats into the Lake and provided with a residence at Swansea Heads. The school he had established at his previous residence at Galgabba Point, was relocated to provide for his family and the nearby camp of quarry workers. As the pupil numbers increased quickly, a site along Swansea Channel was allocated, with building being completed in 1887. The well drained soil on the hillside at the back of The Plains proved to be conducive to farming. A tomato plantation and a peach orchard flourished for a time.



In 1948 Art Mawson bought parallel mining leases dissected by the Pacific Highway, intending to use the land for mining. The lease on Lake Macquarie was purchased from Cam and Sons; the other on the coast from the Parbury Estate. Plans were drawn up for the two new pits to supplement his existing collieries. He also envisaged the construction of a coal loading facility at nearby Spoon Rocks. At one stage he involved a Japanese consortium in a mining venture called Silver Valley Minerals, but it failed to develop. Part of this venture resulted in constructing a breakwater at Spoon Rocks to facilitate a plan to load coal into ships. Unfortunately, by the mid-1950s there were massive disruptions to the mining industry, so Mawson was forced to put his comprehensive plans on hold.



By 1957 Art devised an ambitious plan to design a town, "Mawson", described as a modern planned seaside tourist resort and town of beauty; featuring panoramic views, surfing, and fishing. Initially, he aimed to provide 1,000 building allotments, a modern tourist hotel, shopping complex, drive in theatre, bowling greens, tennis courts and a golf course. There would be separate lots for light industry and ten acres set aside to be donated for schools. A new port further south, "Kaiser", was proposed. Sources: LMCC; G & N Boyd; Photo Time Tunnel

## WILFRED ARTHUR "ART" MAWSON

Art was born in Lithgow in 1901 and lived near the workers club in Tank St. His father, a signwriter, photographer and boxer mentored these skills in his son. Art married Martha Jean Hastie in 1922. Jean had been a bareback rider at Skulthorpe's rodeos, her father had champion trotters. They moved to Newcastle where Art worked for a time as a plasterer and decorator at the Theatre Royal in 1924. Moving to Sydney, the entrepreneurial couple opened a gym in Newtown, followed shortly by a stadium. They both became boxing promoters – Jean being the first lady promoter. Their stadiums expanded to country centres and added wrestling and circus events. Towards the end of the war, coal was badly needed so Art grasped the opportunity to become a mining operator acquiring the Leconfield Colliery at Greta and the Caves Beach mines.

From the hill above the tomato farms and peach orchard, Art overlooked the Parbury Estate down to the ocean and its potential resources and development. The Wallarah Seam was accessed by an open cut coal area and the Radar Hill Colliery; The Great Northern Coal Seam by the Old Normaine and the New Normaine Collieries.



They owned 3 lorries which carried about 300 tons of coal a day from the board and pillar mines, tipping from a gantry to be screened, an operation overseen by Art. The screens were made at a machine shop in Belmont. Screened coal fetched a better price than crushed. The skips were made locally, an electric motor bringing up 6 at a time. Propeller fans aerated the mines, employing up to 130 men. An onsite sawmill processed timber. Art embarked on an ambitious project to harvest rock from the cliff face and construct a breakwater to Spoon Rocks, envisaging a deep-water port to load coal.



Unfortunately, in the mid-1950s there were massive disruptions to the mining industry. Many pits closed as too much coal was being produced; exports had ceased and struggling miners staged a stay in strike. Art turned his attention to utilising his 300-acre lease at Caves Beach in other innovative directions. His vision after watching traffic in Swansea Channel and tourists in Main St was to build a seaside tourist town with many facilities using the resources he had at hand. Clay deposits in the white hill faces were used for making earthenware pipes. Trucks and graders cleared roads and spread the local quarried gravel. Together with architect and town planner, Frank Stone, a bold plan evolved.

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By 1971, after a slow start, 500 homes, shops, schools and hotel were built. The Hotel became known as The Mawson and hosted live bands such as Cold Chisel, Midnight Oil and the Angels. Sources: UON, NBN, Youtube.com, LMCC.

## CAVES BEACH SURF LIFE SAVING CLUB (Ref: Club History book compiled by Alan Wallace, Brett and Gladys Main.)

A prominent feature of the Caves Beach landscape is the Surf Life Saving Clubhouse. Established in 1929, the safest location for the club between Swansea Heads and Pinny Beach was chosen at the southern end, not far from the caves. An access road from Black Ned's Bay and a path from the clifftop were cleared by volunteers. An offer of level land from the Parbury Estate was accepted, and the first building, a tin shed, was constructed in the gully in 1930. As support grew, the first clubhouse was constructed on the hill, 1932. Being in a remote area it suffered from unwanted attention and proved to be difficult to continually traverse the cliffside. It became the caretaker's residence and a second clubhouse was built closer to the beach.



As the club grew in size and success came the third, distinctive yellow, 3 level clubhouse in 1956. Fortunately, water supply had been connected to Caves Beach in 1955, so that it was no longer necessary to use tank water and transport water in drums. The clubhouse was always central to Art Mawson's view of the beach and the new estate he was developing, and so mutual support developed. In the 1973 Maroon and White Ball programme, Art was noted



as a patron. A larrikin element of the club participated in a street parade in Swansea, encouraging spectators to patronise The Mawson with a slogan painted across the windscreen: "DON'T GO DRY DRINK AT ARTS HOTEL".

In 1979, the jolly yellow giant on the hill was superseded by the 2-level clubhouse in the current position in the gully. The Club has maintained an amazing collection of memorabilia, and recorded its development and many successes at local, state and national levels. Some of the intriguing stories about the club can be seen on the Storyplace website run by Museums and Galleries NSW. This website showcases important stories about the history and culture of NSW inspired by memorabilia, photos and objects. It lets people see what has helped shape different communities across NSW at any time, no matter where they are. <https://storyplace.org.au>

### ***"Saved by the Bell: The Caves Beach SLSC Shark Bell***

*For many years, this shark bell was affixed to the shark tower on the top of the hill at the Swansea-Caves Beach Surf Life Saving Club (now known as Caves Beach SLSC). However, the task of reaching the bell to warn swimmers of shark sighting in the vicinity was no easy feat.*



*The tower itself was approximately twenty-five feet high, with SLSC members needing to climb up steel pegs each two or three feet apart to reach the bell. And, as if to make the experience more harrowing, there was a crow's nest atop the tower! The bell remained in this location until the 1950's, when it was eventually deemed as unsafe and removed.*

*The Swansea-Caves Beach SLSC was established at Caves Beach in 1929. The founding members, including the foundation President Ab Payne who, according to current members, 'never entered the surf and didn't even own a pair of cossies!' had recognised the need to patrol the expanse of swimmable coastline between the existing SLSCs at Blacksmith's Beach to the north, and Pinny Head to the south. Patrols started later that year, with six members, who were life-savers in training. By December 1929, 14 members had qualified for their bronze medallions.*

*By December, the club had already raised sufficient funds to build a shelter shed, refreshment booth, dressing sheds, and had acquired material for a surf boat. As Caves Beach SLSC grew the club acquired equipment as necessary, such as surf reel lines and belts, first aid kits, and in 1939, this shark bell and its tower." Storyplace*